

## **Will Distance Learning Work?**

# **We Can't Do That Because . . .**

## **Eleven Common Criticisms Of Distance Education**

**“It’s off-campus instruction and has unqualified or substandard instructors.”**

**A Positive Response:** Move on-campus class to an electronic environment. Try innovative time scheduling and use regular faculty members to teach both local and distant students. Any adjuncts hired should pass muster with the department sponsoring the course as they would under any normal circumstance.

**“I can’t teach to an ‘empty’ classroom.”**

**A Positive Response:** Universities, colleges, and school districts should not be asked to teach to an underfilled classroom. Partnerships between educational agencies and long-term planning can ensure proper enrollments at remote sites as well as local schools.

**“My class size on campus is already too large; no way am I taking any more students.”**

**A Positive Response:** This type of faculty member clearly needs support in the form of technical facilitators and additional training to develop teaching strategies more suitable to larger groups. E-mail and other real-time and delayed interactive communication systems (Asynchronous Distance Learning) are used to support out-of-class contact with students. Funds generated from large student enrollments should be pooled to provide support for the faculty. Joint relationships and cooperative funding can also be considered to take the burden off one teacher or school.

**“My department already is producing more degrees in this field than are needed in the marketplace; we’ve capped our enrollments.”**

**A Positive Response:** This may or may not be true and needs to be studied. Professional statistics may shed some light on what is actually happening. Taxpayers want schools to consider job placement as an important outcome of the academic programs. Consider that our graduates are quite mobile and generally are willing to relocate to other regions for employment or future schooling.

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**“There are no library resources for my students at a distance.”**

**A Positive Response:** These days there easily can be library resources in most locations. With the advent of the Internet, this is no longer the problem it used to be—even in our rural locations of Utah. Our state’s telecommunications systems provide interlibrary access and generally full Internet capability. Almost all of our elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and even private schools have access to the Utah Education Network’s UtahLINK and EDNET.

**“I need to be able to see my students in order to teach my class.”**

**A Positive Response:** With the new integrated voice/video/data technologies in place within EDNET and UtahLINK, teachers now have immediate (two-way) interaction with all of their students at many locations at the same time. Training in integration and interactive techniques for distance learning instructors is provided (free of charge) to all secondary and postsecondary instructors within our state. Such training will help allay these fears for most instructors. With secondary technology systems for data transfer (computer Internet, fax, voice mail, etc.), additional accommodations can be made to provide for speech, foreign language, and even tactile or manipulative fields such as engineering, science, and math courses to accommodate distance learning technology. Faculty may not be wizards at technology, but they usually know more than anyone about what works for them in their teaching field.

**“I teach my students using machines and other lab equipment.”**

**A Positive Response:** EDNET technology allows a high degree of interactivity. It can even accommodate lab equipment and, with the use of trained facilitators, specialized machines. At some EDNET sites within Utah, content facilitators are provided (in addition to the process facilitators) who can assist instructors and students. Usually faculty within the receiving school can provide oversight of planned laboratory experiences for students. Innovative EDNET teachers are finding substitute computer simulations of lab experiences for students. These are often a better alternative to traditional labs.

**“It took me years to develop my courses I’m already teaching. I simply don’t have time to revise curriculum at the magnitude required for distance learning.”**

**A Positive Response:** Here’s the tough part! Schools are just going to have to “bite the bullet” and treat faculty with respect in this regard. They need a little release time and major infusions of computing and media resources to get this job done now before any more time goes by. They need access to expertise in curriculum design using technologies. Since this need is imperative at schools around the state, it is likely to be accomplished with recognition of the need by our state legislature and other funding bodies.

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**“Our enrollments will go down on campus if (that other school) is allowed to teach over the system. I might lose my job.”**

**A Positive Response:** In the current fiscal environment, no school district or other institution in its collective right mind would expend tight resources to serve scarce populations of students whose needs are already being met fully by a local school or campus. However, there are huge gaps in the “fabric” of available vs. needed programs in our state as we move into the globalized information society of the 21st century. Everyone in our communities needs more education of some sort than they have, yet formal schools are not likely to get much more funding or faculty from traditional sources than they now have to meet this burgeoning need.

Partnerships must be the hallmark of our future in education so that we can share faculty, curricula, academic and administrative facilities, and responsibilities for quality outcomes. We certainly will also have to share financial resources. Will students stop going to live classes when they can get instruction electronically locally? Most likely not. Education creates a craving for more, and students are still people with instinctive needs to be in groups rather than alone, whenever possible. Our EDNET system is providing basic education as well as certain specialized courses that meet a broad range of educational needs. Local schools and colleges will always be needed to provide the additional curriculum that should only be offered in a school or college setting.

**“Distance learning technologies cost too much. We need new chemistry labs in our schools desperately in order to provide a quality education. How can you justify spending so much money on relatively few students?”**

**A Positive Response:** Taxpayers now have expectations of their own for ongoing educational opportunities, along with wanting us to educate their youth. We can be accountable to our funding sources through good planning and strategic investment of current funding. We can have proper training and promotion of distance learning programs and teachers. As an example, direct unit costs for the average distance learning graduate student at the master’s level are currently about half that of the on-campus costs.

**“My accrediting body in my discipline would never approve me to teach in a distance learning environment.”**

**A Positive Response:** Considerable progress has been made in Utah over the last 12 years that EDNET has been in existence. All program requests for secondary classes must be approved by the State Office of Education (specialists) and the Utah Education Network Programming Committee (made up of regional educators, parents, and administrators). All teachers teaching high school students within the state’s EDNET system must receive a 20-hour certification course in teaching methods over distance learning. Currently, the Utah State Office of Education and Utah State University are preparing a teaching endorsement for distance learning educators. The endorsement, hopefully, will be approved by the Utah State Board of Education when it is in place by fall 1999. Twelve semester hours of college credit will be available as well.